

111513Z Jul 05

UNCLAS VIENNA 002331

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STATE FOR EUR/SCE AND EUR/AGS - VIKMANIS-KELLER

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: AUSTRIA HOSTS "FREEDOM OF RELIGION"

SEMINAR

¶11. On July 9, EconPolCouns attended a conference on "Freedom of Religion and Principles of Self-Administration of Religious Institutions," with specific reference to Kosovo. Under the auspices of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, the University of Vienna, and the Foundation Pro Oriente, participants from Pristina, Belgrade, the region's religious groups, UNMIK, Contact Group countries, and other came together (see partial attendance list in para. 3). The conference consisted of three parts: one entitled "Freedom of Religion," one called "Safeguarding the Self-Administration of Religious Institutions," and a third called "Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage." Austrian Foreign Ministry Political Director Thomas Mayr-Harting chaired the discussion.

¶12. A chairman's paper summarized the conclusions of the discussion. Key points were:

-- Freedom of religion -- including the right to change religion and the freedom to manifest one's beliefs -- is part of the basic structure of a democratic social order. It is therefore "an indispensable element of a modern, European and democratic Kosovo."

-- Regulations defining religious rights must result from an inclusive process which involves the religious communities themselves.

-- A society's religious and cultural heritage have close links. Protection of religious institutions includes not only their artistic heritage, but also protection and promotion of the exercise of their religious functions.

-- Religious communities are part of a pluralistic social order, and they have the right to participate in public debate. Therefore, "an open dialogue between governmental and religious institutions ... is of particular importance." Participants agreed that Kosovo lacks this kind of dialogue, and called for a platform to provide a further debate on the topic of the conference.

¶13. Key participants from the region included:

-- Bishop Artemije, Serbian Orthodox Bishop of Raska-Prizren
-- Sabri Bajgora, Chief Imam, Islamic Community in Kosovo
-- Rao Byyala, UNMIK Representative, PISG Ministry of Culture
-- Enver Hasani, Head, Office of International Relations, Office of the Prime Minister, Kosovo
-- Archbishop Stanislav Hocevar, Catholic Archbishop of Belgrade
-- Enver Hoxhaj, Member of Parliament, Kosovo
-- Skender Hyseni, Political Advisor to the Kosovo President
-- Bishop Irinej, Serbian Orthodox Bishop of Backa
-- Craig Jeness, Senior Advisor to the SRSG on Minorities Issues, UNMIK
-- Damjan Krnjevic-Miskovic, Special Advisor to the Serbian President on Kosovo and Religion
-- Dusan Prorokovic, Serbian Parliament
-- Eyup Ramadani, Secretary General, Islamic Community in Kosovo
-- Vajko Senic, Serbian Deputy Minister of Trade, Tourism and Services
-- Bishop Mark Sopi, Catholic Bishop of Prizren
-- Besnik Tahiri, Political Advisor to the Prime Minister, Kosovo
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